The era of riots (update)



Fighting the police in Tottenham

This is an introduction and update to the text "The transitional phase of crisis: The era of riots" by Greek communist group Blaumachen.

Submitted by woland.bm on September 22, 2011

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Introduction

(September 2011)

From the writing of the text "The transitional period of crisis: the era of riots" published in June 2011 in the 5th issue of *blaumachen* journal to date (early September of 2011), two very important events have been produced through the development of class struggle. The first event was the emergence of the 'indignant' movements in Spain, Greece, and Israel. The second one was the burst of riots last August in England.

To be sure these two events are important on their own, but from the point of view of our theoretical practice it is *the relation between the two*, i.e. the *rift* between the practices of the participants in these movements, that is of utmost importance. The notion of 'rift' (écart) was first used by Théorie Communiste: "From struggles for demands to revolution there can only be a rupture, a qualitative leap, but this rupture is not a miracle, neither is it the simple realization on the part of the proletariat that there is nothing else to be done other than making the revolution given the failure of everything else. 'One solution, revolution' is nonsense symmetrical to that of the revolutionary dynamic of the struggle for demands. This rupture is produced positively by the unfolding of the cycle of struggles which precedes it and, we can say, is still part of it. This rupture is *prefigured* in the multiplication of rifts inside the class struggle between on the one hand the calling into question by the proletariat of its own existence as a class in its contradiction with capital and on the other the reproduction of capital which is implied by the very fact of being a class. This rift is the dynamic of this cycle of struggles which exists in an empirically verifiable manner" [The present moment, Théorie Communiste]... "In the concept of 'écart' there are three moments: the idea of distance, that of movement and that of interiority/internality [interiorité]. Distance, insofar as these are activities which can be differentiated and opposed to each other; movement, inasmuch as we are not dealing with independent things only coexisting in one and the same place, but rather with a critical reflexivity/self-reflexivity (a critical reflecting back on itself) [retour sur soi critique] of action as a

class, which gives us the third nuance of the term: it's a question of a movement and a distance internal to the activity of the proletariat as a class. It's a question of two faces (having as horizon nothing other than capital / being in contradiction with its own reproduction as a class) of the same action as a class – l'écart is the duality become visible as constraint in capital of existence as a class" [Roland Simon].

The rift between different practices in working-class struggle can take many different forms: it can be a rift between practices that appear in different struggles within the same capitalist state (for example, December 2008 and the movement of 'indignant' in the summer of 2011 in Greece). The practices of one struggle can be produced by the limits of another, and then the two sets of practices may constitute a rift (not only in the direction of struggles without demands, something that is undoubtedly related to the composition of the participants, i.e. the conjuncture of the cycle of struggles). It can be a rift between different practices in one struggle: "In 2006, in Savar, 50km north of Dhaka, Bangladesh, two factories were torched and a hundred others ransacked after workers had not been paid for three months. At first they were demanding to continue working in these factories with a higher wage, but as they were confronted with the delegitimization of demanding, they started attacking their own existence as proletarians by burning or destroying the factories. The rift is not merely the burning of factories; it is the contradictory coexistence of both the demanding and destruction of means of production" [*blaumachen*, "The perspective of communisation" (in greek)].

The rift can also appear between practices of class struggles which take place in different states. "These different aspects are *moments of a totality* that arises from the fact that the second phase of restructuring taking place now, produces a rapidly growing surplus population. Simultaneously it does not increase the proportion of variable capital in total social capital, i.e., it intensifies qualitatively and quantitatively the impasse of the crisis and does not produce an exit from it" [The transitional period of crisis: the era of riots, *blaumachen*]. Class struggle is undoubtely a tangible reality for the proletariat of each state: the proletariat is being exploited by capital in the state where it lives, thus the proletarians necessarily perceive reality as related to their bosses in their state. The case, however, is different in every state (the English police is not the Greek police, the specificity of class struggle in England requires another type of policing). From the point of view of communisation (for which revolution is the self abolition of proletariat and not the 'emancipation' of workers and the transcendence of capitalist society to a 'workers' society'), the rift between practices of struggles that take place in different states is of great importance. Although it is true that the crowning moment for the reproduction of capital, the production of value and surplus value occurs specifically and separately in each state, the very existence of each state is possible only because of its special relationship with the other capitalist states, i.e. its integration in a certain position in the global articulation of states, produced as such through the competition between capitals and the (special) competition between capitalist states. The proletariat has to confront its state and its bosses, but through the global articulation of the total social capitals of the states (which of course contains contradictions and conflicts), the capitalist class exploits the whole of the proletariat. The revolution as the process of abolition of value and abolition of the state will attack in parallel against each state mechanism and it is necessarily going to destroy the articulations of the states (and will not create a worker's state power or parallel forms of self-management of production), i.e. it will necessarily have a global character.

The rift *between practices which appear in different struggles and between practices within a specific struggle* produces, in our cycle of struggle, both class belonging as an external constraint and the overcoming of this cycle of struggles (from our point of view this is produced

as an abolition of class belonging, as a communising revolution). We put the emphasis on *the relation between struggle practices*: “What is important is to identify the rift between practices and not just one practice as ‘revolutionary’ or ‘not revolutionary’. Such a distinction simply does not exist before the revolution and its invocation can only be the nessecarily ideological self reflection of the agents of different diverging practices” [blaumachen, “The perspective of communisation” (in greek)]. The demanding practices of the proletarians within revendicative struggles are not efficient any more and the historical production of this fact is their relation with the practices of struggles without demands: ‘riots’ burst all the more frequently. The historical course of the cycle of struggles is determined by the participation of ever more proletarian strata in the struggles, but this participation does not point to the direction of class unity: The *particular* rift between practices, the one that is produced between struggles which take place in parallel or within one struggle defines the stage of the historical production of the contradiction (the class of the capitalist mode of production and *because of this* class of the revolution). The evolution and transformation of the rifts between practices within the struggles is in itself the historical process that produces the overcoming of this cycle of struggles.

As this cycle of struggle evolves, the proletariat struggles, in the context of the rift between practices within struggles of particular fractions of proletarians, for its reproduction as a class and at the same time is confronted with its own reproduction (the class belonging) externalized as a constraint in capital, i.e. it struggles at the same time *for* and *against* its own reproduction (this is the rift as an internal relation between practices within the same struggle and between practices of different struggles). The crystallization of this contradiction/identity in particular practices and activities becomes increasingly apparent and it seems that it is going to produce violent conflicts inside the struggles.

In this text we analyse the current conjuncture (up to the burst of the movement in Spain in May 2011). By introducing the term ‘era of riots’ we define the transitional period of the crisis and the crisis of this transitional period: “Recent struggles reflect the two basic aspects of the process that produces the revolution of the current period: first, the delegitimization of demands, i.e. demanding is converted into a component of the reproduction of classes, which tends to be marginalized and suppressed, and second, the internal distance produced between proletarian practices in the evolution of class struggle. These two aspects of class struggle are produced in every zone of capital despite all their differences, and is imposed by the objectivity of capital, the economy. We may risk the prediction *that we are entering into an era of riots, which will be transitional and extremely violent*. It will define the reproduction crisis of the proletariat, and thus of capitalism, as an important structural element of the following period. By ‘riots’ we mean struggles for demands or struggles without demands that will take violent forms and will transform the urban environments into areas of unrest; the riots are not revolution, even the insurgency is not revolution, although it may be the beginning of a revolution. The internal distance between proletarian practices aggravates all social contradictions and creates a self-reinforcing process of growing conflicts that includes more and more categories of the working class and the intensification of State repression. The particularity of this ‘era’ is that the dynamics of the struggle cannot produce stable results. In any case, the struggles of the proletarians will inevitably reproduce the opponent class and their own class existence as a class of proletarians. The limit of these struggles, now, is the fact that they are class struggles. The only guarantee to overcome this limit is a practical attack against capital, which is identical with the attack on the very existence of the proletarian class”.

The riots in England confirm the analysis regarding the ‘era of riots’ and they signify a historical milestone for the overcoming of the current cycle of struggles. It is very difficult to ignore the

sequence November 2005 (France) – December 2008 (Greece) – August 2011 (England) even if until now one tried not to notice. Specific practices that appear in this historical sequence (looting, arsons of companies' buildings, arsons of police stations) construct the subject of the excluded, of the structurally produced surplus population within the current cycle of accumulation. These practices confirm the 'end of activism', see "The present moment"), as a particular form of the current class-struggle limits. In France, the urban ghettoization of the excluded proletarians (engineered by the state) left no room for the coexistence of the 'autonomous (in relation to capital)' activists and the insurgents. In Greece the encounter of the activists with immigrants and high school students produced a particular coexistence: those days some activists overcame through their own practices their activism and alternativism. In England urban planning was not an obstacle to such an encounter but the particular alternativism of the milieu was absolutely irrelevant with the practices of the looters (the activist's critique regarding looting practices was so intense that in some cases it became a practice in its own respect, and even some of them participated in the riot cleanups).

The 'indignant' movements confirm the 'end of radical democratism' (see "The present moment"), they are simply put an explosion of the contradictions of the latter. The crisis of 2008, as a crisis of globalization, made it possible for radical democratism to recover after a long absence (from 2003) and to be destroyed through its own triumph. These movements are very broad in terms of composition (ranging from young proletarians ready – only in theory – to join the labor market to rapidly proletarianised petty bourgeois and business executives) and in terms of demands (ranging from a new regulation of capitalism to an alternative management of capitalism, which is described with the word democracy and some adjectives before this word). The triumph of radical democratism is that this broad composition is expressed in its massiveness and in the fact that *the words* used by the activist avant-garde fractions of the past now dominate. What seemed to be '*radical*' in the end of the 1990s – beginning of 2000s (self organization, working-class control of state structures, full depreciation of political parties, 'direct' democracy) is now the very banality of these movements (as a result these words have no longer the old 'radical' content). But both sides of this triumph are in fact the destruction, or more precisely termed, the internal subversion, the collapse of radical democratism. The massiveness, as expected, failed to make the movement visible to the state, let alone to 'legitimize' its demands. The 'radical' words were not able to hide that they were void of content: nobody thinks that these words can mean something by themselves anymore, nobody believes in 'another world which is possible' (that is without a destruction of this world). Within the second phase of restructuring (see the text "The transitional period of crisis: the era of riots") the response of the State to this impressive invasion of the movements of 'indignant' in the public sphere is not a 'new' regulation of the capital relationship; it is somehow straight and tactless: *the police*.

What is most important about the future developments of the crisis and class struggle is the evolution of the relation between the practices in England and the practices of the 'indignant'. This relationship becomes of prime importance because of the liquidity between these two produced subjects (unemployment and precarity are at the heart of the wage relation). The form of the new limit (the police, class belonging as an external constraint) produces, as a transitional stage, a particular form of struggles that we try to approach with the use of the term 'riot'. 'Riots' surround the movements of 'indignant' and eventually they penetrate them and produce rifts (écarts) between the practices of these movements. The rift dialectics work feverishly…